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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [XL](#)
SUBJECT: ST. VINCENT SET TO LAUNCH MAJOR CONSTITUTIONAL
REFORM PROCESS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires D. Brent Hardt, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

Summary

11. (SBU) Vincentians are preparing for what will likely be a hotly contested vote in a November 25 referendum on a new constitution. The proposed constitution, which would turn the multi-island nation into a presidential republic, has been touted by Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves as essential for St. Vincent's democratic development; others doubt the PM's intentions, believing he may be setting himself up to be president for life. The referendum has also served to spur former Prime Minister Sir James Mitchell to re-enter politics and assume de facto leadership of a heretofore listless and penniless opposition. The controversial November vote will likely follow party lines and could prove an illuminating prelude to parliamentary elections due by December, 2010.
End Summary.

To Create a Republic

12. (C) In an August 20 meeting, PM Gonsalves told PolOff that the constitutional reform process, which he claimed had been ongoing since 2003, must now come to an end. Believing that a late-November vote would give the people enough time to review the proposed changes, Gonsalves vowed to be open to debate as the final text took shape. He claimed that the two main reasons for creating a new constitution were to move St. Vincent and the Grenadines out of the "monarchical dark ages," and to shake loose antiquated rules and regulations that hinder the country's ability to govern itself. Gonsalves pointed to the issue of capital punishment, accusing the London-based Privy Council of creating roadblocks designed to thwart local judges' rights to carry out death sentences.

13. (C) Gonsalves further stated that, in order to evolve democratically, St. Vincent had to break free of "Her Majesty" and establish a true self-governing system. He did not specify whether or not replacing the head of state would accompany a withdrawal from the Commonwealth (Note: He hinted it might, but that seems unlikely as continued membership confers certain perks with few obligations. End note.) Gonsalves added that the time was ripe to move forward with a referendum, noting that the transition to a presidential republic should be smooth, with elections likely to occur by the end of 2010 -- near the end of his term as prime minister. The PM did not specify if presidential term limits would be detailed within the new constitution, though the current draft does specify that two five-year terms would be the limit. He hoped for a good turnout during the referendum, clarifying that the Vincentian diaspora would not be able to participate from abroad. "They don't live here," he said, "so why should they be a part of the process?"

Too Little, Too Late?

¶4. (C) Former Prime Minister Sir James Mitchell confided to PolOff in July that Gonsalves' actions would be damaging to the country, mainly because the proposed composition of the government remained unknown. He feared that power could be consolidated fully by the president, and that the creation of a Guyanese-style republic would actually distance St. Vincent further from its democratic agenda. Sir James hoped that voters would see for themselves the errors in the process, but doubted strongly the opposition's ability (or the government's willingness) to inform the public. Sharing his trepidation, civil society activist Marlon Mills told PolOff separately that opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Arnhim Eustace was a "failure" who would not be able to run a campaign to block the constitutional changes effectively. Mills lamented Eustace's lack of understanding of the details involved, and went so far as to accuse him of relishing his place as opposition leader, believing that he may be purposefully stalling to ensure his position remains in place. Despite -- or perhaps because of -- the reservations regarding Eustace's abilities, Sir James joined Eustace's recently-established "Vote No" campaign, lending his support and substantial clout to NDP's movement.

Procedures Not Followed

¶5. (C) Legislative Consultant Peter Purseglove (a UK national who works under contract for the Attorney General's Chambers)

told PolOff in August that the Gonsalves administration was ignoring all procedural norms, as defined by the current constitution, as it lobbies for the new text. He pointed specifically to the formation of quasi-parliamentary committees that were making continuous changes to the new text during the specified timeframe in which public debate should be allowed to take place. The Speaker of Parliament, according to Purseglove, certified that all constitutional procedures were being followed correctly -- a statement he found both intriguing and false. He went on to speculate that, should the referendum result in the passing of the new text, which would also need to be signed and enacted by the Governor General, general elections would likely be held by December 2010 -- matching Gonsalves' earlier prediction.

Comment

¶6. (C) There is a strong feeling in the opposition and civil society that Gonsalves may be attempting to create a presidential post for himself that would allow him to consolidate power after leaving the office of the prime minister. According to the latest public draft of the constitution, it appears that executive powers would be vested in the president, who would also control the military -- powers akin to, if not greater than, a governor general. It is doubtful that voters will be fully informed as to the terms and effects of the new constitution ahead of the impending referendum. There is a draft of the proposed document on the government's website, but many doubt that it is up to date, and fear that additional changes have been or are being made without reference to open debate. With information lacking from the government side, and with the opposition's failure to force more openness, Vincentians will most likely simply vote along party lines on November 25 -- which would undoubtedly result in passage given the weakness of the opposition. Sir James' sudden involvement could, however, strengthen the opposition's stance, possibly making the outcome of the referendum less predictable, and, if the final text differs substantially from the draft posted by the government for comment, there remains the possibility of a lengthy and bitter legal challenge from the opposition.

